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SUBJECT: CHILE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS PRIMER

REF: A) Santiago 367
B) Santiago 270
C) 07 Santiago 1993
D) 08 Santiago 126

¶1. (U) Summary: Chile's presidential elections will take place in December 2009. While the two main coalitions have their candidates -- Eduardo Frei for the ruling Concertacion coalition and Sebastian Pinera for the opposition coalition Alianza -- a number of other contenders remain in the game. With eight months to go, the competition is beginning to heat up. Here is a look at the electoral process and the current issues in play in Chile's upcoming national elections. End Summary.

Presidential Elections: Fifty plus One to Win

¶2. (U) Chile's presidential elections are currently scheduled to take place on Friday, December 11. (Note: The government is putting forth legislation that, if approved, would change the elections to Sunday, December 13, in order to avoid the economic side-effects of an additional holiday in 2009. End note.) Election day is a holiday in Chile and alcohol sales are prohibited beginning the evening before. The president-elect will take office in March 2010 and serve a four-year term, without the possibility of immediate re-election.

¶3. (U) In order to win in the first round of voting, a candidate must receive 50 percent of the votes plus one. If no single candidate receives fifty percent -- a likely scenario in this year's race (Ref A) -- a second round of voting will take place in January ¶2010. Because the Christmas and New Year's holidays mark the beginning of Chile's summer vacation season, many voters are often away from their polling place for the second round of presidential elections. As there are no absentee voter mechanisms in place, those individuals who cannot vote because they are geographically too distant will have to abstain.

Presidential Candidates -- Eight Months and Counting

¶4. (U) Candidates for president currently include:

-- Senator Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle is a Christian Democrat, son of an ex-President (Frei Montalva 1964-1970), and former President himself (1994-2000). Frei recently won the ruling coalition primary (Ref B) to become the single Concertacion candidate representing the Socialist Party (PS), the Party for Democracy (PPD), the Radical Social Democrat Party (PRSD), and his own Christian Democrats (DC).

-- Sebastian Pinera, who lost to Michelle Bachelet in 2006, is the opposition Alianza coalition candidate, representing his own party, National Renewal (RN), and the Independent Democratic Union party (UDI).

-- Senator Adolfo Zaldívar, who was expelled from the DC at the end of 2007 (Ref C), is running with support from the Regional Independent Party (PRI).

-- Deputy Marco Enriquez-Ominami, PS, is running without having left his party despite the Concertación proclamation of Frei as its single candidate.

-- Senator Alejandro Navarro left the Socialist party to represent the "Broad Social Movement" (Movimiento Amplio Social, or MAS).

-- Jorge Arrate left the Socialist party to run for president. He was recently selected to represent the Communist/Humanist coalition "Together We Can" (Junto Podemos, or JP).

Aging Voters and Historical Voting Patterns

¶5. (U) Chile's voters -- and their political allegiances -- have changed little in the last twenty years. A majority of Chile's electorate of roughly eight million are the same voters who registered to participate in the 1988 plebiscite that ousted dictator Pinochet and ushered in the transition to democracy. It is an aging population due to the fact that few younger citizens register to vote. While new legislation to make registration

automatic and voting voluntary has been approved by Congress, it is unlikely that automatic registration will be implemented in time for this year's presidential election (Ref D).

¶6. (U) Relatively few younger Chileans have registered to vote, so electoral decisions rest largely in the hands of the Pinochet-era generation. Most of these voters still vote along the divide of the 1988 plebiscite: those that voted no against the Pinochet dictatorship (Concertación) and those that voted for the continuation of the military government (Alianza). While many older center-left voters may be tired of the Concertación, they may not be able to bring themselves to vote for a rightist candidate like Pinera (though he has declared that he himself voted no in 1988). Many on the left will choose to vote for a minority candidate in the first round and then give their support to the Concertación in an eventual runoff.

¶7. (U) In 1989 and 1993, the Concertación won the presidency in the first round, but the progressive coalition needed to get to a runoff in the last two elections:

-- 1989	Concertación (Aylwin)	55 percent in Round 1
	Mil. government (Buchi)	29 percent
	Independent (Errazuriz)	15 percent
-- 1993	Concertación (Frei)	57.98 percent in Round 1
	UDI (Alessandri)	24.41 percent
	Independent (J. Pinera)	6.18 percent
-- 2000	Concertación (Lagos)	51.31 percent in Round 2
	Alianza (Lavin)	48.69 percent
-- 2006	Concertación (Bachelet)	53.5 percent in Round 2
	Alianza (S. Pinera)	46.5 percent

Opposition Needs a First-Round Win

¶8. (U) Concertación analysts argue that the 48 to 49 percent that Alianza candidate Lavin received in 2000 is the threshold that Sebastian Pinera faces this year as the opposition candidate to the Concertación. In addition, pundits point out that Lavin's populist style allowed him to capture many low-income voters that would usually vote Concertación. Pinera, a wealthy businessman, is not necessarily going to draw those same voters, though he may be more able to draw centrist voters away from the Concertación than Lavin

did. Either way, opinion makers argue that Pinera needs to win in the first round to become Chile's next president. Even political analysts on the right have admitted that it is hard to make the numbers add up for a first-round Alianza win, barring a significant change to the electoral registry.

Concertacion Needs the Left for a Second-Round Win

¶9. (U) Frei, on the other hand, will need the support of independent minority candidates -- and most especially the Juntos Podemos (JP) coalition and the Communist Party -- to beat Pinera in a runoff. The percentage of votes that go to third and fourth party candidates in the first-round election has fluctuated from over 10 percent in 1993 (when now candidate Frei won by a landslide) to 4.5 percent in 1999 to 5.4 percent in 2005. Because the support of the JP is so crucial for a Concertacion win in the likely scenario of a runoff, the Concertacion is in discussions with the Communist Party (PC) regarding how to best end the "exclusion" of the PC from Congress, which is the effective result of Chile's binomial electoral system (septel to follow).

Both Candidates Need the Center

¶10. (U) Chile is known for its "three-thirds" tendency in voting: left, center and right have historically received roughly 33 percent of the votes when running separate candidates. The runoff system breaks that historical pattern by making it impossible to win an initial election with 33 percent of the vote, forcing a runoff election between the two highest vote-getters. However, in the 1993 election, Frei received nearly 60 percent of the votes, while two conservative independents together received roughly 30 percent of the votes. Frei won at that time with the highest majority ever recorded in Chilean elections. His challenge this year -- he is polling around 46 percent -- is how to attract enough centrist voters to make it to a runoff. Meanwhile, his opponent Pinera will be after those same voters.

Apathy and Low Participation Are a Concern of All

¶11. (U) Both main candidates will also be facing voter apathy and abstention, despite mandatory voting. The percentage of registered voters that don't vote in presidential elections has increased steadily since the return to democracy: five percent in 1989; nine percent in 1993; 10 percent in 1999; and 12 percent in 2005. In October's municipal elections, 16 percent of registered voters failed to cast ballots. This year's election pits two main candidates that have been in politics for over 20 years: Frei and Pinera ran against each other for a Senate seat in 1989 (Frei won). Voter abstention rates could go even higher this year.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) With eight months to go, the presidential competition between the government candidate Eduardo Frei and businessman Sebastian Pinera is intensifying. While Frei has recently been proclaimed the Concertacion coalition's candidate, Sebastian Pinera has been in the race since he ran for president in the last general election four years ago. Support for a field of smaller, independent candidates will be a deciding factor in whether the presidential election will end in a runoff. End Comment.

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